

Epiphany 2A
Sermon 1.18.26

Isaiah 49:1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!

The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God." And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength—he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

John 1:29-42

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is

translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). (562)

Lynching postcards were common enough.

These were postcards made of lynchings, picture postcards whose front image were of a lynching. Like you'd see a postcard of the Grand Canyon: "Wish you were here!" Like you'd see of Niagara Falls: "The weather is beautiful!" Lynching postcards featured, of course, that strange fruit as Billie Holliday sang of in the song of the same name, a Black person or a few Black people hanging dead from a tree. Around 4000 were killed just so between 1882 and 1968 in the American South: "Wish you here!"

Horrifying.

Just as strange as the strange fruit, though, to my eyes at least and I imagine to yours, is the gathering of White people at the foot of the tree, unconcealed faces, plain light of day, in some cases people picnicking. There is nothing of shame here.

Which brings us to the images themselves, photos of an event but from a time when nearly no one had a camera and certainly no one would have casually carried one around just in case. Which means these lynchings were planned.

To be certain not all were. Some happened of a sudden, a few White people finding themselves with a Black person in the wrong place at the wrong time, and a rope, a tree, a trumped up cause.

But the lynchings that show up as picture postcards were planned, announced, a photographer arranged for, as in Waco, Texas, a lynching in 1916. The town photographer, Fred Gildersleeve, was called upon and worked with the local government to find a suitable and photogenic place for the big event. Gildersleeve's photos were among the many, many later turned into postcards, these sold in the community.

Which people then bought and sent as mail, in many cases at least. They'd write greetings on the back side, spreading the experience they'd just (I guess?) enjoyed or wish they hadn't missed but at least they got this memento...? On the back of one, a young man wrote to his parents saying, "This is the barbecue we had last night." On the back of another, the writer comments on the image seen on the front: "This is a token of a great day," which becomes the name of a documentary film released in 2021 about the phenomenon of lynching postcards: *Token of a Great Day*.

Something has changed in our perspective: something radical.

John announces Jesus as the Lamb of God. He announces this, it seems, to no one in particular, a spontaneous utterance as if he just couldn't help it.

John, the gospel, begins big, in the beginning when the Word was with the God, this Word that was God, and which in the beginning began to create as a Word spoken, creating an order that would hold a certain logic, an intelligibility as a word so mysteriously can and does. A *logos*: how an utterance can conjure a totally other thing, how some strikes and symbols on paper can conjure a totally other thing, and how these sounds and symbols open us up to the world and open the world up to us, both fixed and free, and open us up to one another, a stability and a playfulness, object permanence meets hide and seek.

We home in now in the Gospel of John, from a cosmic scale to a moment in history when this Word of God had become flesh and lived among us, whose glory some few even saw and was as a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

John was one who saw it, John whose testimony would open the way in the world for this One, whose testimony we hear now, his first words spoken according to this gospel narrative of the same name, John: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

He'd been out at the river baptizing—and some priests came out to press him as to why he was doing this, who he was to do this. He told them he wasn't the

messiah, and he wasn't Elijah, or even a prophet. No, he was just doing this in anticipation of the One who was coming.

Who the next day came, came toward John as if perhaps to be baptized by him, though of whom John then declared (to no one in particular), "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" And he went on to describe an experience that sounds like he already had baptized him: "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.

"I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

Things get a little clearer the next day when, the narrative tells us, John was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" which alone caused those disciples to turn from following John to following Jesus.

It didn't take much apparently. People were that primed. Or Jesus was that charismatic, so full of the Spirit that his just walking by was enough, his just being declared the Lamb of God was enough—even if by so trustworthy a sort as John.

Which is all the more weird because "Lamb of God" was something of an absurdity.

I mean, it's turned out to be one of the most preferred referents for Jesus. It's embedded in the Catholic mass: "*agnus dei*." It's embedded in the Episcopal mass. It's part of the libretto for all the great musical masses, from Machaut's mass of the 14th century to Penderecki's of fourteen years ago. It gives image for art, most famously (in my imagining) in the Ghent altarpiece by Hubert and Jan Van Eyck in

1432, and in the smaller work of two centuries later by Francisco de Zurbarán, a lamb with legs bound at the ankle and, though slaughtered, looking but peacefully asleep. Really, a most orthodox phrase for naming who Christ was and what he did—Lamb of God—it though only shows up twice in all the Bible, only shows up in the Gospel of John. Right here, in fact.

Lambs, of course, were animals used for sacrifice, indeed were the sacrificial animal *par excellence*. They featured prominently in the annual celebration of the Passover, the springtime festival remembering the people's exodus from slavery in Egypt. Then, every household would need a lamb, the first born of its flock and without blemish. As many as 250,000 sheep were needed every year, and since without blemish they were raised a certain way. They'd be swaddled in special temple cloths throughout their young lives, and, when time came, they'd be laid in a manger to keep them contained while examined for blemishes.

Such were the ones considered for God. Such were the ones considered holy *for* God.

But what might it mean, a Lamb not *for* God but *of* God?

As if it's not people sacrificing to God but God sacrificing to people.

As if it's not people taking of their flocks some chosen lamb for sacrifice to God but God taking of his flock some chosen lamb for sacrifice to the world.

It turns the whole process of sacrifice on its head.

Here we thought God was the one requiring a sacrifice, and because of our sin, to cleanse us of sin, so we had to choose of our lambs, find the perfect one. But this way of referring to Jesus has it that we're the ones who require a sacrifice and it is of God, and indeed that God's sacrifice to us is what cleanses us from sin.

Which makes you wonder if this is indeed the sin...? That we require sacrifice? That we require some sacred, monstrous, but strangely beautiful death in order to know ourselves and know our people and establish a sense of belonging and safety and order in the world?

We know ourselves best in reference to what we are not. We know who's included most clearly when we all agree on who is not. We feel ourselves safe only and best when we've purged the danger from among us, when we've killed off the bad one and thus secured the good.

And maybe this is our sin?

But maybe this is our original and originating sin, this righteous death that's at the foundation of every group, every people, every nation? If only we were to kill the right one, then a sacred calm would descend, a blessed stability, which thus proves that we indeed killed the right one.

And then we can have a picnic. We're back in the garden. We've been trying to get back here!

You know, the God of the Hebrews had been saying for centuries that he didn't require sacrifice. He'd been saying it for centuries, through the prophets, through the Psalms, that God doesn't desire sacrifice but right living. God doesn't desire even the most majestic sacrifice, altar, incense, well-dressed priest. Indeed, he hates our solemn assemblies, he'd been saying for centuries. "What use to me is frankincense...? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices pleasing to me..." This he said through the prophet Jeremiah. "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I've had enough of your burnt offerings... I do not delight in the blood of lambs..." This he said through the prophet Isaiah. "I hate, I despise your feasts, ... your solemn assemblies..." This he said through the prophet Amos—and also this: "Seek good, and not evil... Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate," and also this, "...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Indeed, as Micah prophesied: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

So, it's really very simple, what God wants, what God want of us. God desires justice for the poor, the widow and the orphan and the alien in our midst.

So, how are we doing?

It's been another week. The events are distressing enough. (I'm thinking mostly of the ICE raids in the Twin Cities.) The response to these events is another layer of distress. What we each see when armed, masked (mostly it seems) men confront plain-dressed people going about normal business; what we each see when armed, masked men confront placard-displaying people lined up for protest: how is it that we can each see these scenes so differently?

I'll admit a knee-jerk skepticism about anyone masked and armed, anyone especially anonymously relying on state-sanctioned power or even culture-sanctioned power to commit violence. I'll further admit I think this is the perspective the cross of Christ would make way for, indeed the Lamb of God would quietly insist upon.

Our reliance on violence is our sin. Our reliance on violence is our original and our (tragically) originating sin. This is the means of generation of belonging that would have Jesus elsewhere bemoan, "Woe unto this generation." He wasn't bemoaning a cohort of people, a generation as the Boomers or Generation X. He was bemoaning our way of generating a cohort of people, the means of generation that humans never cease to rely on.

We gather by excluding those not included. We establish who's in by excluding who's out, whom we'll kill if it should come to that, whose killing we'll even display—shamelessly! proudly!—so it's never within a shadow of doubt who's got the power to act and who doesn't.

The strong will do what they can and the weak will suffer what they must. This assertion is making the rounds again these days. An insight, an assertion, of ancient Greece, an Athenian general in 416 BC claimed just so in a history of the Peloponnesian War. It's never been entirely forgotten but it was remembered especially following the two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century. The

new world order, which NATO established and the United States helped keep steady, was to make it so this wasn't so, so the world wasn't ruled simply by brute force, simply by the strong doing whatever they liked and the weak suffering as the weak surely must.

But this “real politick” is making a comeback. President Putin of Russia has been giving it a go in Ukraine for over a decade now and President Trump can't any longer stop himself from trying it here in the Western Hemisphere.

And we have to admit, it makes good sense. It's the way of the world, the strong doing what they can get away with and the weak suffering what they must because, well, what choice do they have? It's the way of the world—except the world as it is to be transformed by the Lamb of God. Except the world as is to be *saved* by the Lamb of God, removing this terrible sin from us though not by force but by the appeal of mercy and gentleness.

The earliest image known to the world of Christ crucified was a bit of graffito. On the wall of a room near Rome, it dates from around 200 AD. It's a crucified man's body though with a donkey's head and the words in Greek read, “Alexamenos worships his god.”

Apparently, our artist meant to mock someone named Alexamenos and his ridiculous, weak, asinine Christian god, his facile, wimpy, unmanly faith.

It is perfect that the earliest image of Christ crucified is one of mockery. It is perfect that this perspective is given first place. It implies the journey we must travel. It implies the long journey from seeing in the crucified ones of history a thing to be mocked to a seeing in them a sight to be moved by and to recognize as the way the world shall be saved—that we stop such killing as if it will save us, rather that we recognize such killing as the thing from which we need to be saved, we come to see this as the thing from which Christ crucified does truly save.

“Come and see,” are the words of a phrase that will line our path through the Gospel of John, that we see here first in our reading this morning. “Come and see,”

which seeing will be this: that the Lamb of God isn't a sucker on whose grave we might gleefully dance but is a savior, indeed the savior, whose self-giving love, who's sacrificial life poured out is to rejoice in and then to join in

By this, and only this, the world shall be saved.

Thanks be to God.